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ACTION ARA-01

INFO	LOG-00	ACDA-08	ACDE-00	ACQ-01	CIAE-00	DODE-00	DOEE-00
	SRPP-00	DS-00	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	L-01	ADS-00
	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OMB-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	P-00
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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO USCINCSO MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
INFO SECSTATE WASHDC 2054

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003227

FOR CINC FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/26/08
TAGS: PREL, VE
SUBJECT: SCENE-SETTER FOR YOUR VISIT TO VENEZUELA

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR JOHN F. MAISTO

1. (C) YOU WILL VISIT VENEZUELA ON THE EVE OF ITS NOVEMBER 8 REGIONAL ELECTIONS AND ITS DECEMBER 6 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. YOU WILL FIND A TOUGH, DRAMATIC POLITICAL CAMPAIGN IN FULL SWING, CHARACTERIZED BY HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND HIGH ANXIETY.

2. (C) FORMER COUPSTER HUGO CHAVEZ IS IN THE LEAD IN THE OPINION
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POLLS, BUT IS BEING PRESSED BY FORMER CARABOBO GOVERNOR AND INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE HENRIQUE SALAS ROMER. FURTHER BACK, BUT STILL PLAYING A STRATEGIC ROLE IN THIS ELECTION, ARE THE FORMER MISS UNIVERSE AND MAYOR OF CHACAO IRENE SAEZ, BACKED BY THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (COPEI), AND LUIS ALFARO UCERO, POLITICAL STRONGMAN OF THE DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY (AD).

3. (C) CHAVEZ'S RADICAL PAST AND HIS UNCERTAIN COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY HAVE DARKENED THE ELECTORAL CLIMATE, CAUSING HIS OPPONENTS TO RAISE THE SPECTER OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE SHOULD HE WIN. FOR HIS PART, CHAVEZ CALLS HIMSELF AN "AUTHENTIC DEMOCRATIC" WHO WILL RELEGITIMIZE THE STATE THROUGH CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM. HE ARGUES THAT VENEZUELA'S TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE FAILED THE COUNTRY AND LEFT A LEGACY OF RESENTMENT AND DESPAIR WHICH IS

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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DEMOCRACY'S GREATEST ENEMY. THE ELECTORATE IS STILL WITHHOLDING ITS OPINION, MOVING IN WAVES FROM ONE CANDIDATE TO ANOTHER--FIRST TO IRENE, THEN TO CHAVEZ, AND NOW, SLOWLY, TO SALAS ROMER--AS IT TRIES TO FIND A PRESIDENT CAPABLE OF GOVERNING VENEZUELA.

4. (C) THE VOLATILITY OF THE ELECTORATE, THE STARK CHOICE PRESENTED BY THE CANDIDATES, AND THE LACK OF TRUSTWORTHY GUIDEPOSTS TO THE ELECTIONS, HAVE GIVEN RISE TO COUP RUMORS, POLITICAL INTRIGUE, AND PLOTTING. SOME OF THESE RUMORS HAVE INVOLVED KEY MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY, INCLUDING ARMY COMMANDER GENERAL RUBEN ROJAS PEREZ AND NATIONAL GUARD COMMANDER FREDDY JOSE ALCAZAR WEIR.

5. (C) PRESIDENT CALDERA AND HIS GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING MINISTER OF DEFENSE TITO RINCON BRAVO AND MINISTER OF INTERIOR ASDRUBAL AGUIAR, HAVE MADE CLEAR THAT THEY WILL OVERSEE CLEAN AND FAIR ELECTIONS ON THE DATES PRESCRIBED BY LAW AND THEN GUARANTEE A NORMAL TRANSFER OF POWER ON FEBRUARY 2, WHEN THE NEWLY-ELECTED PRESIDENT WILL BE

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INAUGURATED. PRESIDENT CALDERA AND MOD RINCON BRAVO HAVE SAID THE ARMED FORCES WILL SUPPORT THE CONSTITUTION AND ITS DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS.

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6. (C) OUR OWN ROLE HAS BEEN STRAIGHTFORWARD: WE SUPPORT THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AND WE WILL RECOGNIZE AS PRESIDENT OF VENEZUELA THE CANDIDATE WHOM THE NATIONAL ELECTORAL COUNCIL PROCLAIMS THE WINNER OF THE DECEMBER 6 ELECTIONS. WE HAVE MET WITH ALL MAJOR POLITICAL AND MILITARY PLAYERS TO UNDERScore THIS MESSAGE.

7. (C) THE ELECTIONS ARE AN IMPORTANT OVERLAY ON A LONG-STANDING, EXCELLENT BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP FORGED BY OUR STRATEGIC ENERGY PARTNERSHIP AND OUR COMMON COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRATIC, CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT. WE FULLY EXPECT THESE EXCELLENT RELATIONS TO CONTINUE, NO MATTER WHO IS ELECTED PRESIDENT.

8. (C) AS YOU MAKE YOUR CALLS, YOUR INTERLOCUTORS AND THE PRESS WILL SEE IN YOUR VISIT TO VENEZUELA A SPECIAL MESSAGE. FOR SOME, ESPECIALLY THE PRESS, YOUR VISIT WILL BE PROOF OF OUR OWN ANXIETY OVER THIS ELECTION. YOU SHOULD ATTEMPT TO TURN THIS SUSPICION AROUND, INDICATING THAT YOUR VISIT IS EVIDENCE NOT OF OUR CONCERN BUT OF THE STRONG, FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP. YOU WILL ARRIVE IN VENEZUELA JUST A LITTLE OVER ONE YEAR AFTER PRESIDENT CLINTON'S OCTOBER 12-13, 1997, VISIT TO CARACAS. SINCE THEN, WE HAVE HAD A STEADY STREAM OF HIGH-LEVEL VISITORS, INCLUDING

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SECRETARY OF STATE ALBRIGHT, SECRETARY OF ENERGY RICHARDSON, AND
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THEN-COUNSELOR TO THE PRESIDENT THOMAS "MACK" MCLARTY. FORMER
PRESIDENT CARTER WILL VISIT CARACAS NOVEMBER 2-4 IN ANTICIPATION OF
HIS PARTICIPATION AS AN OBSERVER IN THE DECEMBER 6 ELECTIONS.
THESE VISITS, YOURS INCLUDED, ARE THE PRODUCT OF A MATURE BILATERAL
RELATIONSHIP WITH ONLY GOOD PROSPECTS.

9. (C) YOUR MEETINGS WITH YOUR MILITARY COUNTERPARTS WILL PROVIDE
US THE OPPORTUNITY TO UNDERScore OUR COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT, AND TO NOTE THAT OUR
STRONG MILITARY-TO-MILITARY RELATIONS ARE BASED ON A COMMON VISION
OF THE ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES WITHIN A CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK.
YOU WILL RECEIVE HEARTY AGREEMENT FROM YOUR INTERLOCUTORS, WHICH IN
ITSELF WILL HIGHLIGHT THE HIDDEN STORY OF THIS STORMY ELECTORAL
PERIOD: VENEZUELA'S DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, INCLUDING THE ARMED
FORCES, ARE RESILIENT AND DURABLE AND WILL CONTINUE TO RESIST ANY
EFFORT TO TURN THE ELECTIONS FROM THEIR TRACKS.

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